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**Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India: The Politics of  
Representing ‘the People’**

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**Abstract:** There is today a growing sense of a global rise of populism. Right-wing populist leaders and parties claim to represent the people and pit them against a ‘corrupt’ elite and ‘dangerous’ Others. However, the international dimensions of populism remain largely unexplored in the populism and International Relations (IR) literature. By analyzing the relationship between foreign policy and populism, this article seeks to show how the phenomenon of populism can be integrated into IR theory and how IR scholarship can inform debates on populism. The article argues that poststructuralist IR with its focus on foreign policy as boundary-drawing practice that demarcates the Self from the Other allows us to study how populist actors can use foreign policy as a site for the (re)production of their claim to represent the people. To grasp this, the article identifies different discursive strategies through which the people/elite antagonism can be constructed and interacts with other antagonisms such as the inside/outside divide of nationalism. It illustrates its arguments with a case study on India’s foreign policy discourse under the Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi who has promised to purify India from a corrupt elite and pursue an ‘India first’ policy.

**Keywords:** Populism, foreign policy, India, identity, International Relations Theory

## Introduction

The election of populist politicians and parties such as Syriza in Greece, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, or Narendra Modi in India alongside seismic events such as the votes in favor of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom suggest a “global rise of populism” (Moffitt 2016). The rise of populism is often seen as a threat to liberal democracy and challenge to the liberal international order (Ikenberry 2017).<sup>1</sup> Though populism has drawn increasing scholarly, policy, and media attention in the last years, its international dimension remains largely unexplored in the populism and International Relations (IR) literature. Recently, scholars have sketched this potential research agenda (Chryssogelos 2017; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017), but focused mainly on the European context. In particular, there has so far been no attempt to study populism from the perspective of IR theory.

By analyzing the nexus between foreign policy and populism, this article seeks to show how the phenomenon of populism can be integrated into IR theory and how IR scholarship can enable us to study the complex relationship between foreign policy, populism, and nationalism, with which populism is often conflated in the emerging, largely policy-oriented IR literature on populism (cf. Mead 2017). While the existing scholarship suggests to study the impact of populism on foreign policy or the international outlook of populists, this article foregrounds another line of enquiry that examines the role of foreign policy in creating and sustaining a populist electoral coalition: How do populist actors use foreign policy to assert themselves as the representative of the people and how does this assertion play out in their foreign policy?

Though populism has often been characterized as an “essentially contested concept”, a common feature of populism is “some kind of appeal to ‘the people’ and a denunciation of ‘the elite’” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 2ff.). According to a very common understanding of populism in the literature, populism can be conceptualized as a ‘thin ideology’ that “considers

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<sup>1</sup> In a more recent article, Ikenberry (2018) partially backtracked from this pessimistic assessment.

society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543; cf. also Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). While this approach draws attention to the fact that populism is typically combined with other ideologies such as nationalism and thereby warns of conflating populism with other concepts, it is less clear how we can analytically distinguish between different ideologies or study their interaction. As foreign policy is typically understood as a state-centered practice and often makes references to the nation (e.g. *national* interest), the analytical distinction between populism and nationalism is crucial for understanding the nexus between populism and foreign policy.

This article argues that a discursive conception of populism which draws on the work of Ernesto Laclau is better equipped to meet this challenge. It understands populism as a discursive strategy that links together different frustrated social demands and constructs a collective identity of ‘the people’, and the populist actor as its representative, by placing them into opposition to a common Other – the establishment – that is accused of frustrating the fulfillment of these demands (Laclau 2005). Compared to the ‘thin-centered ideology’ approach, a discursive approach places greater emphasis on the actual construction of sociopolitical categories such as ‘the people’ and enables us to distinguish between populist and nationalist modes of identity formation by identifying the distinct practices of differentiation and Othering through which such subjectivities come into being in the first place. This insight also offers a potential entry point for IR theory, namely poststructuralism which conceptualizes foreign policy as a boundary-drawing practice through which states constitute and reproduce their identities by demarcating the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’, the Self from the Other (Campbell 1998, 9; cf. also Diez 2004; Hansen 2006; Nabers 2009). This article shows that not only the state but also the populist notion of the people can become an ontological referent that is (re)produced through the

discourse of foreign policy. It identifies different discursive strategies through which the people/elite antagonism can be constructed and interacts with other antagonisms such as the inside/outside divide of nationalism. It argues that the most effective strategy lies in linking the elites to the foreign Other (e.g. other states, transnational elites, refugees, or international institutions) and representing them as a collaborative threat to the people and their will, sovereignty, values, prosperity, and identity.

The article illustrates this operation of populism and its relationship to nationalism and foreign policy by analyzing the Hindu nationalist discourse of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) – roughly Indian People’s Party – and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi is often described as a typical populist leader who appeals directly to the people by bypassing intermediary institutions and accused the political establishment of ‘minority-appeasement’ at expense of the Hindu majority community (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017; Chatterjee-Miller 2018). While Jaffrelot and Tillin discuss Modi under the label of populism, they do not elaborate on the relationship between nationalism and populism and limit their analysis to his personalized style of administration and leadership. Chatterjee-Miller highlights the “authoritarian streak” and the risks of Modi’s “divisive populism” in domestic politics (Chatterjee-Miller 2018), but suggests, like other scholars (cf. Basrur 2017; Gupta et al. 2018), that Modi’s assertive Hindu nationalism had very little effect on India’s foreign policy (Chatterjee-Miller and Sullivan de Estrada 2017). In this article, I will discuss the nationalist and populist dimensions in the discourse of Modi’s BJP and show how it uses foreign policy as platform to assert itself as the ‘true’ representative of the people and reimagine India as a Hindu nation.

The forging of a monolithic, strong Hindu identity that promises societal cohesion and martial strength is often described as the hallmark of the Hindu nationalist worldview (Sagar 2014). Remarkably, the majority of IR studies on Modi, the BJP, and Hindu nationalism however

offers neither a theorization nor any proper discussion of the role of identity in the BJP's foreign policy (cf. Chaulia 2002, 2016; Bajpai 2014; Hall 2016; Ganguly 2017; special issue in *International Affairs* 2017; Singh 2017; Gupta et al. 2018). The reason for this neglect arguably lies in the fact that most of these studies implicitly or explicitly draw on realist and liberal IR theory which treats the state typically as unitary actor with a given identity. Some constructivist studies have explored the role of identity in the BJP's foreign policy and provide important insights into this relationship (see, in particular, Singh 2013; cf. also Chacko 2012; Ogden 2014; Chatterjee-Miller and Sullivan de Estrada 2017). However, these works predominantly treat identity as a (domestically generated) 'property' of the state that impacts on its foreign policy and thereby draw a rather rigid boundary between 'domestic' and 'foreign' that fails to recognize how the 'foreign' as the site of difference makes possible the (re)production of state identities. By offering a relational conception of identities, a poststructuralist approach shows that identities are inherently instable and incomplete as they can only be constituted and practiced against the difference of an Other. This insight also avoids the risk of essentialism.

The article is structured as follows: The first section provides a poststructuralist theorization of the relationship between populism, nationalism, and foreign policy and identifies different discursive strategies of constructing the populist people/elite antagonism qua foreign policy. The second section offers a sketch of India's foreign policy discourse and the rise of Hindu nationalism, before the third section applies the theoretical framework to examine the interplay of populism, nationalism, and foreign policy under Modi's BJP. The fourth section highlights the added value of adopting a poststructuralist perspective to meet the challenge of right-wing populism to IR.

## **The Relationship between Populism, Nationalism, and Foreign Policy**

Laclau's discursive understanding of populism implies that populism as a political project does not represent preexisting sociopolitical categories such as 'the people' but rather constitutes a distinct way of discursively constructing the very categories it claims to represent (Laclau 2005; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). A discursive ontology, which Laclau first developed in his collaborative work with Chantal Mouffe, presumes that the meanings and identities of subjects, objects, or practices are constituted within relational and differential systems of signification – or discourses – which relate differences to confer meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105ff.). Discourse, as Laclau (2005, 68) explicates, may therefore not be reduced to writing or speech but refers to “any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. (...) something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else.” Accordingly, discourse is no ideational category but creates a domain of intelligibility through which a particular material reality can be known and acted upon (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 108).

For the present research, this means that populism is a distinct discursive strategy of constructing a collective identity: It constructs 'the people' by placing disperse and unfulfilled social demands into a common opposition to the political establishment. The latter assumes the role of the Other against which these different demands can be represented as equivalent. This chain of equivalence creates an equivalential identity of 'the people' by antagonistically juxtaposing it to 'the elite' and thereby canceling out the differences within the in-group (Laclau 2005, 73ff.). The Other is represented as the antagonist that is blamed for “depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 3). The populist actor can then claim to represent 'the people' against an elite that has frustrated their demands, and presents these demands as expression of



a popular will. What makes populism a powerful discourse is that ‘the people’ is ultimately an empty signifier – a signifier with an indeterminable signified – that can be inscribed with various (conflicting) meanings and thereby generate a collective identity between different social forces and their demands and facilitate their political support for a common cause (Laclau 2005, 69f.).

The inherent negativity in the formation of identities is captured by the term antagonism. Accordingly, it is the presence or construction of an Other that makes possible a subjectivity such as the state, nation, or the people but also blocks its full realization or wholeness, since its formation depends on difference, the drawing of a line between something and something else (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 125). There is thus no (extra-discursive) foundation from which identities or the objective ‘essence’ of any particular community could be derived. Rather, different discourses, which stand for different ways of representing the world, seek to establish their particular perspective as the ‘normal’ or ‘commonsensical’ perspective. If a particular understanding of the people has become dominant and the ‘natural’ perspective, then the discourse has achieved – what Laclau and Mouffe call – discursive hegemony: “a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, x).

The process of identity formation through practices of differentiation and Othering also informs poststructuralist IR scholarship. Poststructuralist IR argues that state identities are never simply given but “always constructed against the difference of an other” (Diez 2004, 321) and as such “states are never finished as entities” and “always in a process of becoming”, since they have “no ontological status apart from the many and varied practices that constitute their reality” (Campbell 1998, 12). Hence, “there is no objective essence of a state or nation; rather, the ontological referent becomes the meaning that is produced in a discourse” (Nabers 2009, 192). By “demarcate[ing] an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside’, a ‘self’ from an ‘other’, a ‘domestic’ from a

‘foreign’”, as Campbell has prominently shown, foreign policy is a crucial discursive practice through which this difference is established and the state is made possible (Campbell 1998, 9/12). In this sense, “foreign policies rely upon representations of identity, but it is also through the formulation of foreign policy that identities are produced and reproduced” (Hansen 2006, 1). In this hierarchical identity formation, the sovereign state community as a space of order, identity, and security is constituted by juxtaposing it to the ‘foreign’ or ‘international’ as a space of anarchy, difference, and insecurity (Ashley 1987).

Instead of reducing foreign policy to “the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations” (Hill 2003, 3), poststructuralism draws attention to a different dimension of foreign policy that lies in “*the establishment of the boundaries* that constitute, at one and the same time, the ‘state’ and ‘the international system’” (Campbell 1998, 61). Hence, foreign policy constitutes and (re)produces the state in whose name it operates by relating it to its constitutive outside and thereby secures not only its identity and boundaries but also constructs various forms of international Otherness. Though representations of fear and danger are integral to the discourse of foreign policy, the Other does not need to be constructed as threat (Hansen 2006).

The state is closely related to the nation. Nationalism is a discourse that constructs the nation by endowing it with a particular national essence that defines national belonging and thereby creates an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). While a national essence or the identity of a ‘people’ is commonly seen as preceding the reality of the state, the state often precedes the nation and nationalism then serves as “a construct of the state in pursuit of its legitimacy” (Campbell 1998, 11). Foreign policy can in this context then be understood as “the continuous attempt by governments to assume the role of a representative of the nation” (Nabers 2009, 192).

As populism and nationalism both make reference to the signifier ‘people’ and are often closely related, De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 310) have highlighted the different nodal points and antagonisms of populist and nationalist discourses: Populism revolves around “a down/up antagonism” in which the people are discursively constructed as “underdog” in opposition to a small, illegitimately powerful establishment. Hence, it is the antagonistic divide between the people as down-group and the establishment as up-group that defines populism. The central point of reference of nationalist discourses, by contrast, is ‘the nation’, as imagined community of belonging and shared fate, past, space, and other distinct characteristics, that is constructed through an “in/out or member/non-member distinction” by relating it to other national communities, immigrants, or some other perceived external threat (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 308/310). Typically, nations evolve around mythical narratives that, as the poststructuralist Roland Barthes (1972, 129) noted, “transform history into nature” insofar as they depoliticize and naturalize historical contingencies by tracing the origin of the nation back to a fictional moment of purity, unity, or glory and identifying it as the eternal national essence. This provides subjects with ontological security (Kinnval 2006; Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2015) – a secure sense of Self that can apparently be grounded on an extradiscursive foundation (e.g. religion or nature).

This article argues that ‘the people’, on behalf of which populist actors claim to speak, can also be an ontological referent that is (re)produced through the discourse of foreign policy. We can identify different discursive strategies through which the populist notion of the people or a populist-nationalist amalgam of the people as underdogs and nation can be articulated via the discourse of foreign policy. The first strategy follows a pure populist logic, while the other three strategies combine to different extents populist and nationalist logics:

- 1) A pure populist discursive strategy pits the people-as-underdogs against the domestic power elite which is accused of undermining popular sovereignty, that is, the sovereignty of the 'common people', 'the many', or 'the man in the street'. Locating the elite/people antagonism within the state, it brands a state's foreign policy as 'elitist', as being driven by the interests, values, and concerns of the elite rather than the 'common' people without giving the latter any voice.
- 2) A discourse can also construct the people-as-underdogs by juxtaposing them to a transnational elite that is accused of depriving the people of their sovereignty. This transnational Other can comprise transnational corporations and managers, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, or supranational institutions such as the European Union. Here, the elite/people antagonism has an inside/outside component insofar as the elite is located outside the state.
- (3) Combining populism's up/down antagonism and nationalism's inside/outside antagonism more closely, a discourse can also represent other nation-states, terrorists, refugees, or globalization as threats to the 'common' people, provided that – and this is the difference to a pure nationalist discourse – there is a clear reference to the elite in that the elite is, for example, accused of being indifferent to these threats or even a beneficiary, thus making the people-as-underdogs rather than the national community or the society in general the prime ontological referent that needs to be protected. In short, the elite rather than the foreign Other is represented as the prime cause of this threat/problem.
- (4) This leads to the final and arguably most effective discursive strategy which attempts to establish a direct link between domestic elites and threatening foreign Others and accuses the political establishment of actively colluding with 'foreign forces' and representing their interests rather than the people. In this form of antagonistic Othering, nationalist and populist logics are almost completely merged and the people are constructed as both underdogs and nation.

As these different articulations show, populist discourses can draw on the practice of foreign policy construct a range of ‘dangerous’ internal and external Others which can serve as common negation for constructing a collective identity of the people either as underdogs or as both underdogs and nation. These different discursive strategies are not mutually exclusive but can also be combined.

When foreign policy becomes a site for the (re)production of a popular will and identity, populist actors attempt to use foreign policy to assert their role as ‘rightful’ representative of the people, thereby claiming to restore popular sovereignty and pursue a foreign policy on behalf of the people. If populism and nationalism are combined, popular and national sovereignty are merged and the populist-nationalist actor claims to be ‘true’ representative of both the people as underdogs and nation. In both cases, the populist actor must differentiate itself from the political establishment and highlight special or extraordinary qualities that would predestine it to be the authentic voice of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 64). In other words, the populist actor must convince the audience that it is the only one who can restore popular/national sovereignty. A populist foreign policy is thus sovereignty-oriented in that it asserts to reinstate the sovereignty and will of the people which is not only threatened by actors and processes located outside the state but also by the state’s establishment itself. If a populist discourse constructs the domestic establishment as ‘corrupt’ or even as ‘enemy of the people’ and reinforces this representation by linking it to the foreign Other, it offers populists in power the legitimization to sideline the traditional foreign policy establishment located in the foreign ministry and centralize or personalize foreign policy decision-making processes.

The bypassing of intermediary institutions, in turn, serves the populist purpose of establishing a direct connection to the people and simultaneously reinforces the representation of the establishment as ‘corrupt’ and ‘untrustworthy’. This direct connection to the people can, once the populist is in power, also be sustained through the state’s engagement with the external world

which can be used for the purpose of populist grand-standing. Foreign affairs provide the populist actor with a potential stage to project a particular self-image as ‘common man’ or ‘defender’ of the people. This can involve, for instance, a deliberate break with diplomatic conventions, a more confrontational foreign policy rhetoric that appeals to the guts of the people, or the active use of social media channels such as *Twitter* or *Facebook* to communicate with the people directly over foreign policy issues.

Before applying this theoretical framework to the populist *Hindutva* discourse of Modi’s BJP, the next section will give a short overview of India’s foreign policy discourse and the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India.

### **India’s Foreign Policy Discourse and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism**

Following the understanding of foreign policy as a discursive practice that constructs and reproduces the state in whose name it operates by drawing a political boundary between Self and Other, this article understands the Indian state as the product of competing discourses that seek to impose their political projects on society. The dominant discourse was initially the ‘Nehruvian’ project, named after India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, which emerged during the colonial encounter and sought to create a collective Indian national identity against the difference of the colonial Other. This collective national identity is a construct that provided initially the independence movement led by the Indian National Congress legitimacy and authority in pursuit of its goal and, since Indian independence in 1947, the Indian state in exercising control over its territory. The Nehruvian project represented India as a democratic, federal, and secular-pluralist state founded upon a composite nationalism (Khilnani 2003).

The representation of the British colonial rulers as foreign Other which exploits and suppresses the Indian people marks the origin of an Indian discourse of foreign policy that seeks to endow

India with a particular meaning through modes of differentiation and Othering and the narration of the founding history of India. This founding myth, which was most compellingly told by Nehru in his *Discovery of India*, grounds Indian identity in an immemorial and glorious civilizational past and then identifies cultural-religious notions of tolerance, pluralism, and syncretism, emerged from the absorption and fusion of different religious groups and practices, as India's essence. Though the secular-pluralist Nehruvian discourse highlights the positive role of 'outside' influences and cultural mixing and accommodation, it also suggests – and this is significant for understanding the rise of Hindu nationalism – that India existed before the arrival of the 'foreign' Muslim and British rulers as a spatially bounded national entity (Svensson 2013, 29/83; Abraham 2014, 32). Nehru, for instance, speaks of “(t)he moslems who came to India from *outside*” and refers to the “coming of Islam” as “*foreign* conquest” (Nehru [1945]1985, 258/267; emphasis added), thereby drawing a boundary between 'domestic' and 'foreign' religious-cultural groups and practices and creating a hierarchical civilizational space that distinguishes between indigenous and extraterritorial subjects.

In international affairs, the Nehruvian discourse propagated, after Indian independence, a policy of non-alignment. Though non-alignment was conceived of as a principle of exercising autonomy in foreign and economic affairs and maximize India's interests and security (Rana 1976; Nayar and Paul 2003; Pant and Super 2015), it was also a normative critique of the prevalent international relations discourse and attempt “to create a ‘third’ area of peace outside the two power blocs so as to secure a more just and equitable world order” (Behera 2009, 143; cf. also Chacko 2012). The Nehruvian discourse was underpinned by a strong belief that India could shape the international order by principled moral and political argument and setting an example for others rather than through economic or military power. This belief embodies the idea of “India's exceptionalism” which positions “India as a unique civilization-state” that is an example for peaceful coexistence and is thus destined to assume the role of moral leadership

in international relations (Chatterjee-Miller and Sullivan de Estrada 2017, 37f.; see also Chacko 2012; Sullivan 2014).

India's non-alignment and claim to exceptionalism were not simply, as often suggested, a manifestation of India's internal identity, values, or cultural legacies. Rather, foreign policy served as a site, where the difference between the Indian Self and the Other could be (re)produced and it could be delineated what the Indian Self is, what it stands for, and thus what Indian-ness means. Once the colonial Other against which India's national identity was initially constituted had been removed, the Nehruvian discourse sought to establish a close link between the state's foreign policy and a particular representation of Indian identity. Drawing a hierarchical dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside', the discourse articulated India's identity in negation to the antagonistic cold war international system and represented India as an actor that can both in its internal and external affairs accommodate differences and therefore keeps away from the two cold war camps and instead pursues a policy of non-alignment and combines democracy with socialism. In other words, the discourse represented the 'outside' as a space of difference and danger that would lack what the Nehruvian discourse sought to frame as India's alleged national essence: the ability to absorb and synthesize different viewpoints, cultures, and traditions (author's publication, 76ff.).

While the Nehruvian state project remained largely uncontested in the 1950s, the humiliating 1962 Sino-Indian war and economic stagnation and political upheaval, which manifested inter alia in a peasant uprising and secessionist violence, threatened to erode the Nehruvian discursive hegemony. The Indian government under prime minister Indira Gandhi responded to these crises by embarking on program of significant military modernization and, against the backdrop of a rapprochement between the US and China in the early 1970s, by moving closer to the Soviet Union (Nayar and Paul 2003, 164ff.; Chacko 2015, 331–332). Internally, Gandhi resorted to populist welfare programs and authoritarianism, which resulted in a centralization



of political power and ultimately culminated in the declaration of state of emergency and the suspension of constitutional rights in 1975. Her failure to deliver on appealing election promises such as the abolishment of poverty resulted in a gradual disillusionment with the Congress and created political space for other parties that resorted to similar populist appeals. Under her watch, the Congress Party also increasingly resorted to communal appeals by exploiting disputes within and between different religious communities for short-term political gains and thereby encouraged sectarian tendencies, corruption, and patronage (Jaffrelot 1996; Ganguly 2003; Subramanian 2007).

It was in this context that Hindu nationalism and the BJP gradually moved to the center stage of Indian politics since the late 1980s. Though the Hindu nationalist movement dates back to the colonial era, it failed to mobilize the majority Hindu community and seriously challenge the dominance of the Indian National Congress in the pre- and post-colonial era. The Hindu nationalist discourse, which seeks to politicize a particular interpretation of Hindu religion,<sup>2</sup> articulates an ethno-cultural, majoritarian nationalism and asserts that Hindu-ness and the majority community embody the essence of India (Varshney 1993; Jaffrelot 2007). The movement consists of a variety of non-governmental organizations, groups, and institutions, and the BJP as its political wing. It is centered around the paramilitary volunteer organization *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) founded in 1925 (Jaffrelot 2005). The RSS understands itself first and foremost as a cultural organization that provides character, physical, and intellectual training and serves as cadre factory of the BJP. Through these and other activities, the RSS seeks to unite, organize, and strengthen the Hindu community in the struggle for discursive hegemony.

A crucial role in this attempt to hegemonize and thus naturalize a representation of India as a Hindu nation plays the creation of a mythical Hindu *rashtra* (nation). The discourse appeals to

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<sup>2</sup> For a different reading of Hinduism and critique of this politicization of Hindu religion, see Tharoor 2018.

an alleged pre-Muslim era of Hindu unity and glory and provides a mythical narrative of India as an ancient Hindu nation, whose ‘natural’ boundaries ran from the Himalayas to the sea and constitute ‘Akhand Bharat’ (‘Undivided India’) (Svensson 2013, 29/83). The restoration of ‘Akhand Bharat’ is a declared goal of the RSS, whose members conduct their prayers in front of a map of ‘Akhand Bharat’ (Hansen 1999). While the Nehruvian discourse offers a more inclusive narrative of India’s founding history and highlights mutual cultural-religious mixing, the Hindu nationalist discourse equates India with Hinduism by marking only those who regard India both as fatherland *and* holyland as full and loyal members of the national community and thus represents Muslim and Christians as foreign Others (Savarkar 1938, 148). As a result, Jainists, Buddhists, and Sikhs, whose religions originated on the Indian subcontinent and are closely intertwined with Hinduism, are part of the national community, whereas Muslims and Christians can only be part of this community if they are fully assimilated into the ‘Indian mainstream’ and recognize India’s Hindu heritage.

The representation of the dangerous Muslim and Christian Other which has dominated Hindus for a millennium by taking advantage of their alleged disunity and weakness forms the basis of the Hindu nationalist foreign policy outlook (Basrur 2017, 10). Accordingly, the forging of a monolithic Hindu nation, as Sagar has argued, serves the purpose of installing a “martial spirit and social cohesion” in Indian society which would enable it “to defend itself against external aggression” (Sagar 2014, 237). While IR scholars typically focus on these aggressive and militaristic elements of Hindu nationalism (see Vanaik 2002; Singh 2013), Sagar also draws attention to the Hindu nationalist belief in a common humanity and Hinduism’s unique spiritual qualities for the promotion of world welfare, unity, and peace (Sagar 2014, 243f.). While this assertion resembles the universalist aspirations and moral leadership claims of the Nehruvian discourse, the Hindu nationalist discourse underlines that martial cohesion through Hinduization is the precondition for India’s survival and the promotion of these ideals.

Given the communal appeals of Indira Gandhi and her successor Rajiv Gandhi and growing divisions within Indian society, the BJP presented itself in the 1990s as party of national unity and branded the Congress Party as ‘pseudo-secular’ and ‘anti-national’ in pandering to religious minorities and castes and using them as vote banks at the expense of India’s national unity, while marginalizing the interests of the majority Hindu population (Advani 1992; Shourie 1997). While the BJP could capitalize on these issues and managed to form the first BJP-led government in 1998 under prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who implemented one of the core foreign policy demands of the Hindu nationalists: to make India a nuclear weapons power (cf. Vanaik 2002; Das 2008; Singh 2013), its rise to power cannot sufficiently be explained with the weakening of secularism or growing corruption under previous Congress governments but needs to be seen in the context of the more fundamental political, social, and economic crises and changes that beset India in the 1990s: a severe financial crisis that resulted in a policy of economic liberalization, increasing globalization of the Indian economy and society, and a growing urban middle-class; weak, short-term coalition governments; and the end of the cold war which deprived India’s non-aligned policy of its main rationale and led to a gradual realignment of India in the international system (Chiriyankandath 2004; Corbridge, Harriss, and Jeffrey 2013).

By disrupting sedimented Self/Other relationships, these dislocatory events disrupted existing modes of being and belonging and created feelings of ontological insecurity for many people, invoking existential questions about ‘who are we’ and ‘what is our place in the world’. In this situation, Hindu nationalism could serve as a source of identification and ontological security by giving (simple) answers to these existential anxieties and thereby satisfying a desire for a secure sense of Self in a world that appears to be in flux. In short, *Hindutva* promises order, identity, orientation, spiritual clarity, discipline, and collective strength (Hansen 1999, 4–5; Kinnval 2006, 3ff.). Thus, the continuing appeal of the *Hindutva* discourse, on which Modi’s

rise to power thrived as well, lies in the creation of a seemingly stable, eternal, and God-given foundation – Hinduism – that promises not only a full and secure identity but also to transform and modernize India without compromising its ‘basic’ values, customs, and traditions.

## **The Interplay of Populism and Nationalism in India’s Foreign Policy Discourse under Modi**

Though Hindu nationalism has thrived on populist sentiments before, it has been Narendra Modi who embodies and projects this *Hindutva* populism as political strategy, style, and grammar of leadership in particular (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017, 185f.). In May 2014, the BJP came to power in a landslide victory, becoming the first political party to win a clear-cut majority in the national elections for 30 years (Sridharan 2014). Unlike previous BJP election campaigns, this campaign was almost completely arranged around the person of Narendra Modi who appealed directly to the people through the sophisticated use of social media such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* and orchestrated media events (Chakravartty and Roy 2015). Modi is a controversial figure in Indian politics and embodies for many the more extreme wing of Hindu nationalism associated with the RSS and Hindu communalism and, in particular, the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujrat when he was the state’s chief minister (Varadarajan 2002).

For creating an electoral coalition on the national level, Modi and the BJP shaped a discourse that closely intertwines populist and nationalist logics. It sought to capture and reinforce a strong sense of disillusionment with “the Congress-led government’s corruption and poor performance, particularly the slow growth, un-employment, and inflation” and “the quality of Congress party leadership, which Modi flayed as effete, indecisive, weak, and dynastic” (Sridharan 2014, 26/29). The discourse represented Modi as “an outsider for Delhi (...) isolated from the elite class” (Modi 2014b) – a “common man” from “a backward caste” – and placed

him alongside the people-as-underdogs by juxtaposing them to the power elite, and the “elite (Nehru-Gandhi) family” within the Congress in particular (Modi 2014c), and by blaming the “rule of a dynasty” (Modi 2013c) for India’s social, political, and economic crisis and problems. By placing ‘the people’ in a common opposition to the elite, the discourse can present the heterogeneous demands of, for example, poor peasants and members of the urban middle-class as equivalent and present Modi as the leader who will fulfill their frustrated demands. This construction of the people-as-underdogs has not been limited to domestic politics but also extends to foreign policy. During the election campaign, Modi declared for instance that “foreign policy should be decided by the people and not by some politicians sitting in Delhi” (quoted in Hindustan Times 2013), thus presenting ‘the people’ as voiceless and disenfranchised by an ‘elitist’ foreign policy.

The populist *Hindutva* discourse reinforces this antagonistic divide between ‘the people’ and illegitimately powerful, born-to-rule elites by associating the latter with the foreign Other. This discursive strategy conflates elite and foreign Other and makes them a collaborative threat to ‘the people’. It also exposes the nativist core of this discourse. By invoking the foreign Other, Modi and the BJP draw on the discourse of foreign policy that (re)produces a collective sense of Self through modes of Othering, differentiation, and exclusion that constitute particular objects as foreign and thereby inscribe the boundaries and identity of the Self. Through such “boundary-producing political performances” and their underpinning “representations of danger” (Campbell 1998), the populist *Hindutva* discourse seeks to construct a homogenous, secure, and strong Hindu nation-state through the externalization of difference and danger, that is, it marks a series of Others and accuses them of preventing or threatening the realization of a strong and monolithic Hindu identity. Significantly, the discourse does not locate the foreign Other primarily or exclusively in the state’s outside – the international system – but within the confines of the Indian state, and within the political establishment in particular.

During the election campaign, Modi for example established a link between the Congress Party and the British colonial rulers by stating that the “Congress immersed in vote bank politics” and that they “have learnt the ‘art’ of divide and rule well from the colonial rulers”; therefore, the “nation should unite against the Congress the way it got united during the freedom movement” (Modi 2013d). The Congress leaders are thus represented as a kind of comprador class who has allegedly internalized a “neo-colonialist mindset”, which manifests, for instance, in the use of “the colonial language to rule people who do not understand, read or write English” (Vijay 2008, 32) and prevents them from “seeing India as one entity, only as a collection of castes and religions to be used as vote-banks” (Shukla 2014). This ‘pseudo-secularism’, as the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* noted during the election campaign, “is essentially a Western secret weapon to deny Hindus their nationhood which they and others robbed or attempted to rob a thousand years ago and which are still trying to deny through their secret agents”: Accordingly, the Congress and other “so-called ‘secularists’ are the real enemies of India” who are “obviously financed by foreign agencies, if not foreign governments” (Organiser 2013a).

This, as the populist *Hindutva* discourse claims, has also resulted in a corruption of India’s foreign and security policy. Instead of countering threats to India’s security such as the “demographic invasion from Bangladesh” and Pakistan’s “multipronged strategy” to destabilize India through “sabotage, subversion, espionage and Jehadi terrorism”, as Modi’s National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval (2012) warned, the “(Congress-led) government is unable and unwilling to act, and in denial mode in admittance of the existence of such a problem”, since there are ‘forces’ in India’s political establishment who “consider these immigrants as captive vote banks.” This leads Doval to the conclusion: “The civilisational substance of Indian nationhood, that provides *raison d’être* to its identity, is under an incessant onslaught by those very forces that ought to strengthen its roots and broadened its scope” (ibid.). In a language that is remarkable similar to the positions of the RSS (2012), Doval, who served as director of

India's internal intelligence agency till 2005, not only accused his own government of corrupting India's security but also suggested that Muslim immigrants pose a threat to India's civilizational identity. In a similar vein, Modi repeatedly implied that the Congress elites are unpatriotic traitors who collude with India's enemies. For example, Modi accused "Congress leaders (of) lending their voice to those who want Azadi (independence) in Kashmir", thus suggesting that the Congress is supporting Kashmiri separatists (Modi 2017c). He also attacked the Congress-led government for its 'weak' response to Pakistan and China's hostile acts:

Everyday, we are surrounded by dangers. Pakistan is not putting an end to its activities, China keeps threatening us often, it intrudes our land! (...) If China gets in, we're watching...when Pakistan decapitates our soldiers, we're waiting. People don't know who is running the country (...) the problem is not on the border, the problem is in Delhi. (...) Till the time we do not have an efficient, patriot government (...), we will not be able to guarantee the nation's security (Modi 2013b).

BJP and RSS make no secret of their suspicions about the patriotism and loyalty of the *foreign-born* Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi. "It is for Hindutva to restore India to its past glory", as the *Organiser* (2013b) writes, rather than the "foreign chairperson of the Congress who knows little of Hinduism and even less of India's greatness and is quite happy to see a fettered people kept that way". Similarly, the senior BJP politician Subramanian Swamy (2017) questioned whether Rahul Gandhi truly is an Indian citizen and a Hindu by producing fabricated documents that would allegedly show that the Congress leader embraced British nationality and converted to Catholicism. The representation of the dangerous, sinister, and united minority Other with links to India's external enemies has always been central to the Hindu nationalist discourse (Anand 2011). Through their presence in the 'rightful' homeland

of the Hindus, Muslims and Christians are not only accused of contaminating the 'pure' Hindu people but also of acting as potential 'fifth column' that is receptive to anti-national propaganda and can be used by external actors to weaken and harm India (Bajpai 2014, 134).

By establishing a link between the establishment and India's foreign Others, the populist *Hindutva* discourse thus constructs two overlapping subjectivities: the people as underdogs and nation. The populist element lies in the juxtaposition of the 'besieged' people to an illegitimately powerful political establishment that is accused of putting its own power privileges and 'special' interests over the interest of the 'common' people. Though the discourse has a populist dimension, it is first and foremost organized around the nodal point of the nation which must be protected against the nation's out-groups such as the Muslim and Christian minorities, illegal immigrants, terrorists, or Pakistan and thus follows a clear nationalist logic. In other words, the discourse revolves primarily around an inside/outside antagonism and moderates the emptiness of the signifier of 'the people' by giving it a relatively concrete meaning and equating the Indian people with Hindus. Its populist logic thus serves primarily the overarching nationalist cause of representing Hindus as the autochthonous people of India and aims at broadening the BJP's electoral base by appealing to anti-establishment sentiments outside the core Hindu nationalist voter base.

By essentializing and stereotyping the Other, the discourse seeks to cancel out the differences among Hindus (caste, class, religious sects etc.) and project the lack of the Hindus onto the Other which is blamed for depriving the Hindu people of their sovereignty, identity, prosperity, values, and voice. Through this, the discursive constitution of a Hindu community through the encounter with the Other is masked over and a complete Hindu identity appears within reach. By accusing the political establishment of minority-appeasement and thus of representing the foreign Other rather than the Hindu people, the discourse constructs not only a dangerous and powerful Other, which takes advantage of the weakness and disunity of the Hindus, but also



reinforces the Hindu nationalist demand for a strong and monolithic Hindu identity that can resist the Other.

By engaging in these processes of antagonistic Othering, the discourse not only seeks to constitute a collective Hindu identity but also Modi's identity as the 'true' representative of the Hindu people who will restore their sovereignty in India's internal and external affairs. Differentiating Modi from 'weak' prime ministers such as Manmohan Singh, Modi and the BJP sought to project an image of him as strongman who embraces a more assertive nationalism, exudes an aura of personal determination, menace and strength, and will pursue a more 'muscular' foreign policy. This projection unfolded a strong appeal among members of the electorate that want India to play a more assertive and influential role in world politics. As a BJP supporter in Bihar stated for instance:

Manmohan Singh is meek, he could barely speak. If the head of your house is so weak, then the neighbors will mess with you. Pakistan's army came and cut the heads of our soldiers and Manmohan Singh did nothing. China threatens us on our borders and they do nothing. We needed a strong man, a powerful man to lead India. If Pakistan cuts heads of two of our soldiers, Modi will chop off twenty Pakistani heads (quoted in Peer 2017, 34–35).

Alongside this strongman image, Modi was however also represented as a leader who embodies with his teetotal, spiritual, and vegetarian lifestyle the ideals of a particular brand of Hinduism and 'traditional' values but is, at the same time, 'modern' as manifested in his known tech-savviness or extensive use of social media. This makes Modi the ideal projection screen

for the people's hopes and desires for development, modernization, and change and simultaneously domesticates the anxieties, fears, and uncertainties that rapid socioeconomic and cultural transformations entail, thereby offering the Self a sense of ontological security.

Taken together, these two images of Modi – as strongman and devotional Hindu who combines its spiritual and moral qualities with a modern outlook – symbolize the two core tenets of Hindu nationalism and what Modi proclaimed would guide his foreign policy approach: “Shakti” (strength) and “Shanti” (peace) (Modi 2013a). As we will see in the following section, after his ascent to the premiership, Modi and the BJP used India's foreign policy as a site for the reproduction of India's identity as a Hindu nation and Modi's identity as the true representative of its people.

### **Between ‘India First’ and Hindu Internationalism: Modi's Foreign Policy**

Since becoming Prime Minister in 2014, Modi has expanded a significant amount of time and energy in conducting India's international engagement (Singh 2017) and induced a new “momentum” into Indian foreign policy (Mohan 2015). In the following, I show how the Modi government used India's foreign policy to sustain the populist-nationalist electoral coalition that brought it to power by establishing a close link between Indian foreign policy and a particular representation of India as a Hindu nation and between Modi and the people. This representation of foreign policy finds expression in an ‘India first’ policy, the promotion of a Hindu internationalism, and the projection of Modi as a ‘common man's’ prime minister in foreign affairs.

#### **‘India First’: Dealing from a Position of Strength with India's Enemies**

During the election campaign, Modi proclaimed an “India first” policy that will manifest in “a confident and sure India, engaging with the global community on its own terms and principles”

(Modi 2014a) and dealing with threats to India's national security from a position of strength (Modi 2013e). The 'India first' mantra manifests itself first and foremost in what scholars describe as the more "assertive" (Bajpai 2017) and "muscular" (Ganguly 2014) approach towards India's archenemy Pakistan. Pakistan plays a crucial role in the Hindu nationalist imaginary. It serves as the prime external Other against which India is discursively constructed and reproduced as a Hindu space. Accordingly, Pakistan symbolizes the conquest and subjugation of the ancient Hindu *rashtra* through Islamic invaders and the later partition of 'Akhand Bharat' into two separate states. By Islamizing the Pakistani threat and representing it as an aggressive, irredentist, and cultural enemy, the discourse seeks to communalize the Indo-Pakistani conflict and unite Hindus in a common front.

In spite of his confrontational rhetoric during the election campaign, Modi has initially shown himself ready to engage Pakistan by inviting PM Nawaz Sharif (alongside all other South Asian state leaders) to his inauguration in May 2014, travelling to Pakistan and re-initiating a comprehensive dialogue process in December 2015 (The Hindu 2015). At the same time, the Modi government has signaled a partial shift away from India's policy of strategic restraint to a "policy of graduated escalation" that stipulates a more befitted response to Pakistani provocations and aggressions (Chellaney 2014). Coined as "defensive offense" by Modi's NSA Doval, this policy is founded on the premise that India needs strategic leverage towards Pakistan and increase the costs of anti-Indian acts (Doval 2014). In keeping with this policy, the NSA gave the border security forces the permission to "fire at will" and with "full force" even at the slightest Pakistani provocation, as practiced by India's security forces in October 2014 when they retaliated Pakistani machine-gun fire at the Line of Control with heavy mortar shelling until the Pakistani side waived truce flags (Economic Times 2016). After the incident, Modi publically declared: "Pakistan has been taught a befitting lesson" (quoted in Times of India 2014).

The time for another ‘befitting lesson’ had come in October 2016, when the Modi government, in response to two cross-border terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistan, launched ‘surgical strikes’ against terrorist bases in Pakistan. Though Indian security forces have carried out similar covert military actions beyond enemy lines before – there were at least three similar operations under the previous Congress-led government – the Modi government, unlike previous governments, made the surgical strikes public (India Today 2016). The BJP actively sought to instrumentalize the strikes for its populist *Hindutva* agenda: The strikes allowed the BJP to rally large parts of the Indian public behind the government and reproduce the image of Modi as strongman, triggering, as the Indian newspaper *Firstpost* (2016) noted, “a euphoric phase among Indians who were desperately seeking vengeance for the killings of jawans (soldiers) and wanting a clear message sent to Pakistan. Everyone – the Opposition parties, bureaucrats, industry and the *aam aadmi* (common man) – lauded the Narendra Modi government’s political will.”

The surgical strikes were however not only utilized to underscore – in the words of the BJP’s general secretary Ram Madhav – that “India under Modi is a more assertive nation” (quoted in Washington Post 2016), but also to assert India’s Hindu identity. After the strikes, the BJP put up posters across India which portrayed Modi as the Hindu God Ram, aiming his weapon at Pakistan’s leader Nawaz Sharif portrayed as Ravana (the primary antagonist in the ancient Hindu scripture Ramayana) (Firstpost 2016). Similarly, Indian defense minister Manohar Parrikar stated: “Indian troops were like Hanuman who did not quite know their prowess before the surgical strikes” (quoted in Times of India 2016a). Hanuman is a devotee of Lord Ram and a central character in various Hindu scriptures. When some politicians of the opposition and journalists questioned the government’s account of the military operation and demanded further evidence, the Union Minister in the Modi government, Uma Bharti, responded that those “who say that if Pakistan is demanding evidence about the surgical strike, they should be given

the evidence; such people should take the citizenship of Pakistan” (quoted in Indian Express 2016).<sup>3</sup>

This representation of the surgical strikes suggests that an interplay of nationalist and populist logics rather than primarily strategic considerations informed the BJP’s decision to carry out and publicize the strikes. Foreign and security policy serves here as a site for the reproduction of a national Self vis-à-vis a threatening foreign Other and of the people vis-à-vis a ‘corrupt’ establishment that has failed to implement the popular demand for a more ‘befitting response’ to Pakistani provocations in the past. Though non-BJP governments have responded to Pakistani security threats with military means as manifest, for instance, in the development of a nuclear weapons program or the military intervention into the Pakistani civil war, BJP and RSS typically accuse the Congress of a “soft approach to Pakistan” and ‘appeasement’ of Muslims (Organiser 2013c). By communalizing the surgical strikes and asserting that whoever does not support the government is, by definition, not part of the people but the enemy, the populist *Hindutva* discourse seeks to assert its claim that India is a Hindu nation and the BJP is its rightful representative. As Modi rose to power on his reputation as strongman, he was under domestic pressure to respond forcefully to the series of Pakistan-aided terrorist strikes and publicly display the resolve and toughness of his government. The “surgical strikes”, as top BJP cadres acknowledged in an informal interaction with journalists, have boosted the party’s prospects in the upcoming state elections since the “political will” shown by Modi in giving a “befitting reply” to Pakistan for supporting terrorist activities will resonate among people (quoted in Times of India 2016b). Thus, the symbolic value of the surgical strikes – the alleged demonstration of political will, resolve, and toughness and the impression that India has become more ‘assertive’ – is more important than their actual strategic substance or significance.

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<sup>3</sup> These questions arose because Pakistani officials rejected the claim that India’s armed forces had carried out surgical strikes into Pakistani territory.

## Hindu Internationalism

Though Modi is celebrated by some scholars for his “muscular and nationalistic ‘India first’ geostrategy” (Chaulia 2016, 206), there is, apart from Modi’s more hardline stance on Pakistan and a slightly more assertive approach towards China (see Bajpai 2017), little evidence that India has under Modi generally shifted to a more aggressive, unilateral, and confrontational foreign policy. While the Hindutva ideology is often equated with a militaristic and aggressive nationalism, it simultaneously represents Hinduism as a force for human welfare and peaceful coexistence in keeping with the ancient Vedic dictum “Vasudaiva Kutumbakam – the world is one family” (Modi 2016b): “Hindustan is born in order to achieve this destiny” (Modi 2014b). “Assimilation and respect for all ways of thinking and worship”, as the RSS newspaper *Organiser* (2015) claims, “is the unique contribution of India”, enabling “Bharat (...) to guide the world for peace and prosperity.” Modi’s foreign policy is underpinned by what we can call a Hindu internationalism: It derives an internationalist and universalist aspiration from Hinduism and seeks to establish a close link between Indian foreign policy and Hinduism, whereby India is reimagined as a Hindu nation and India’s foreign policy appears like a natural expression of its Hindu identity.

Unlike the right-wing populism of Donald Trump and his ‘America first’ dogma with its isolationist and anti-globalist tendencies, Modi’s foreign policy thus generally recognizes that we live in “an interdependent world” (Modi 2014d), that India benefits from globalization, and that “India, which always stood for ‘Vishva-Bandhutva’ and peace – the brotherhood of the world – has a great responsibility in helping the world counter (common) challenges” (Modi 2015a). Accordingly, Modi, for instance, used India’s foreign policy to promote economic growth and development by fostering foreign investments, business collaborations, and the greater exchange of goods and services. At the Hanover trade fair in Germany, Modi launched the much-publicized ‘Make in India’ campaign that seeks to stimulate investment flows and

make India into a global manufacturing hub (Palit 2017, 147–149). Though encouraging a further liberalization of India's economy, Modi's economic policy, as Surupa Gupta (2018, 18) argues, also has "mercantilist" elements and is rather "pro-business" than "pro-market" insofar as it urges "Indians to manufacture products in India rather than import them". This dose of economic nationalism along with popular elements such as subsidized incomes, loan waivers for farmers, and other welfare programs plays to Modi's nationalist-populist support base. Moreover, Modi's foreign policy has remained committed to multilateralism in international relations. In international climate change politics, Modi, for instance, enunciated a subtle shift in India's hardline negotiation stance and demonstrated a willingness to assume greater international responsibility (Narlikar 2017, 100/102). He justified this shift at the 2015 climate summit in Paris by arguing that "(t)he choices a people make are shaped by their culture and beliefs" and that the "Kshetrapati Sukta in our Rig Veda" would show that "Nature has always been treated as Mother" in India and "does not exist for human race, but that we can't exist without Nature. So, Nature is meant to provide and nurture, not to exploit" (Modi 2015b). On the world stage, Modi seeks to project the notion of India as a Hindu civilization and nation. Unlike his predecessors, Modi speaks almost exclusively in Hindi during his visits abroad, gifts primarily Hinduist artefacts such as the Bhagavad Gita to his counterparts, observes Hindu rituals, and frequently visits Hindu and Buddhist temples during his foreign trips (Muni 2017, 126). When Modi's speaks of India's "civilizational ethos" (Modi 2017a), he generally refers to Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas or the Hindu monk Vivekananda who underscored the universal appeal of Hinduism and sought to project India as a "Vishwa Guru (Teacher of the World)" (Modi 2014e). As a result, Modi can present himself as the rightful representative of the Hindu people and claim that his foreign policy is restoring their sovereignty by projecting an image of India as a Hindu nation to the outside world.

While the universalist appeal of India's allegedly syncretic culture is also a prominent feature of the Nehruvian discourse and some scholars claim that "Modi has adopted a version of Hinduism in foreign affairs that emphasizes the kind and inclusive side of it" (Gupta et al. 2018, 5), Modi's Hindu internationalism also has clear exclusionary sides. On the one hand, this reimagining of India as a Hindu nation marginalizes non-Hindu Indians, in particular Muslims and Christians, and Hindus who oppose this politicization of Hinduism. On the other hand, the constitution of Hinduism as a peaceful and tolerant culture is premised upon a hierarchical Self/Other dichotomy and thus simultaneously articulates a violent and intolerant Other. For example, Modi's NSA Doval (2011) claimed that imperialism is intrinsic to monolithic religions such as Islam or Christianity in which "violence was approved to achieve, mutually intertwined, politico-religious objectives", while "oriental religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism etc., even when at their zenith, with no major religions to compete, did not opt for political conquests or holy wars". Through this hierarchical dichotomy, the Hindu nationalist discourse can heave (Hindu) India to a place from where it can claim to represent the universal: a global political community and thereby position India as a leading power in the international system. Modi's Hindu internationalism thus complements rather than contradicts his 'India first' policy.

The ambiguity of this Hindu internationalism also manifested in India's South Asia policy. Modi invited the heads of states of all member states of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his inauguration in May 2014 and pronounced a "'Neighbourhood-first' approach" (Modi 2017b), highlighting that "(m)y vision for South Asia is the same as my vision for India – Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (cooperation of, development of all). All South Asian countries are partners in our journey towards development" (Modi 2016a). While the 'Neighborhood First' policy, which promises more cooperation, connectivity, com-



merce, and investments in the region (Muni 2017), displays a willingness to assume international responsibility and recognition of positive interdependence, the extension of the 'India first' principle to India's neighborhood can also be interpreted differently. The retired Indian diplomat O.P. Gupta (2014) noted for instance in the *Organiser* that the "SAARC countries are located" in "Akhand Bharat" and praised Modi for bringing the "countries of Akhand Bharat together" at his inauguration. While the Modi government does arguably not aspire to reunite 'Akhand Bharat', the representation of South Asia as a Hindu space implies that it regards South Asia as its natural and exclusive sphere of influence and expects regional and extra-regional states to recognize India's hegemonic status. For instance, the Modi government imposed an economic blockade on the land-locked Nepal in 2015 to pressurize Nepal's leadership into making changes to the new Nepali constitution (Indian Express 2015). While previous Indian governments have also occasionally tried to interfere into the internal affairs of South Asian countries, the mythical notion of an ancient Hindu nation gives further impetus to a chauvinistic foreign policy that violates the principle of state sovereignty in South Asia.

### Modi's Populist Grandstanding in Foreign Affairs

Modi has used his visits to foreign countries and participation in multilateral fora not only for projecting India's Hinduist ethos, but also for the purpose of populist grandstanding. In this context, his frequent personal rapports with world leaders and the reception that he receives during his international visits shall convey the image of the strong, popular, and hyper-active leader who has transformed India and significantly enhanced its standing, power, and influence in the world. Exemplifying the populist appeal of Modi to both the 'common man' and scholars, Sreeram Chaulia (2016, 2/120) writes in *The Modi Doctrine*:

The frenetic pace of his foreign travels, the high-profile powwows he does with his international counterparts, the plethora of agreements across multiple sectors that he signs, and the spellbinding speeches he delivers overseas are all part and parcel of his trademark style of wooing and sweeping the world off its feet. (...) It is a charm offensive and an astute pitch for national interests rolled into one big thrust to position India as a major power whose time to shine on the world stage has finally come after decades of disappointment. (...) India is on the road to be a leading power owing to its leader and his unparalleled mobilisation of national will.

Like most populists, Modi conducts politics by maintaining a state of semi-constant political mobilization that seeks to occupy the political space and bypass intermediaries. Through the extensive use of social media channels, a Narendra Modi App, and the monthly radio program *Maan ki baat* (conversation of the month), Modi relates directly to ‘his’ people and can claim that he has given voice to the people. He shows off selfies on *Twitter* with world leaders, posts pictures, and video clips of his visits abroad on *Facebook*, sends emails and SMS messages to citizens about the various achievements of his foreign policy, and encourages them to send him suggestions and comments. In short, Modi’s foreign policy should appear as an unmediated expression of a popular will. For this purpose, Modi also tried to sidestep the established media and even banned media representatives from accompanying the prime minister aboard his aircraft to foreign trips (Wire 2018).

The attempt to dominate and control India’s foreign policy agenda also reflects in the strengthening of the role of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) in foreign policy-making over other government departments. This centralization of decision-making in the PMO means that all key decisions are made by Modi and his closest aids, particularly NSA Ajit Doval, while the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has lost in importance (Chaulia 2016, 20; Muni 2017,

133). This also allowed Modi to depart from established tenets of Indian foreign policy and remove the principle of non-alignment from India's official foreign policy rhetoric. Though previous Indian governments, including the Vajpayee government, have begun to redefine non-alignment and pursued, similar to Modi, a policy of multi-alignment that stipulates a multi-directional engagement of all major powers (Hall 2016; Basrur 2017), they have nevertheless hold on the rhetoric of non-alignment and regularly participated in the summits of the Non-alignment Movement. Modi has broken with this tradition (Pant 2014).

This signals a potentially more profound change in Indian foreign policy which not only manifested in a greater willingness to deepen the strategic partnership with the United States and sign foundational defense agreements that could provide the basis for a strategic alliance in the future (Pant and Joshi 2017), but also in India's Israel policy. Defined by one scholar as the "partnership that dare not speak its name" (Blarel 2016), Indo-Israeli relations were brought into the open by Modi in 2017 when he became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel. The visit and India's partial redirection of its Palestine policy mark a break from India's conventional foreign policy approach and have symbolic value for Hindu nationalists. For them, India's traditional approach to the Israeli-Palestine conflict "has been Muslim-centric" and was an expression of the "appeasement" of Indian Muslims (Organiser 2014). By redefining Indo-Israeli relations, Modi's BJP can not only claim to restore the sovereignty of the Hindu people, but also place India alongside Israel as a victim of Islamic terrorism and thereby underline the need for the Hindu majority community to assert itself against the Muslim 'aggressor'. At the same time, however, Modi has sought to maintain India's multi-directional foreign policy and also engaged Muslim-majority countries such as Iran.

Another distinctive feature of Modi's foreign policy with a populist dimension has been the engagement of the Indian diaspora during international visits. As part of this diaspora diplomacy, Modi attends well-orchestrated, mega events for Overseas Citizens of India and Non-

resident Indians. He addressed, for instance, big crowds at the iconic Madison Square Garden in New York (18,000 guests) and the Wembley Stadium in London (almost 60,000). On the one hand, Modi's diaspora diplomacy aims at mobilizing the Indian diaspora as a foreign policy lobby in other countries and encouraging them to invest in India (Chaulia 2016, 24). On the other hand, the diaspora politics also serves the populist purpose of representing Modi as the true and only representative of the people who receives a "rock star reception" (New York Times 2014) by the Indian diaspora wherever he goes. By using his visits abroad for meeting the 'common' people and not only state and business leaders, Modi creates and sustains an image of himself as a common man's PM who interacts with the people and listens to their suggestions and concerns. This allows Modi to mitigate the traditionally elitist nature of foreign policy and establish through his foreign policy a direct link between the people and the populist leader whose foreign policy then appears as an expression of a popular will and popular sovereignty.

Though Modi is now as prime minister part of the establishment, he can through the diaspora events preserve and extend the electoral coalition that brought him to power by reproducing the notion of the people-as-underdog and Modi as their representative. Introducing Modi at the diaspora event in London's Wembley Stadium, then-British prime minister David Cameron for instance told the crowd: "They said a chai wala (Tea seller) would never govern the largest democracy, but he proved them wrong. He rightly said *acche din aane wale hain* (good days are coming). But with his energy, with his vision, with his ambition. I will go on further and say *acche din zaroor aayega* ('Good days are definitely coming')" (quoted in Huffington Post 2016). Cameron's statement shows how other state leaders can let themselves be roped in for retelling the populist narrative of Modi, the political outsider from a backward caste, who will make India great again.

In sum, Modi's attempt to use India's foreign policy to present himself as common man's prime minister follows a clear populist logic with ambivalent implications: While he has, through his diaspora diplomacy, *Maan ki baat*, and extensive use of social media, bridged the gulf between the people and the elite in the realm of foreign policy and did not restrict his popular appeals to Hindus, Modi's attempt to appeal to the people directly by circumventing intermediaries can weaken democratic institutions and encourage 'post-truth' politics.

## **The Challenge of Right-wing Populism to IR**

The global rise of right-wing populism poses a challenge to IR scholarship, since populist categories such as 'the people' and 'the elite' or the identity politics underpinning both populism and nationalism do not readily fit into established IR categories. In particular, the focus of mainstream IR theories such as neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism<sup>4</sup> on systemic or structural factors and the treatment of the state as a more or less unitary actor complicate the study of right-wing populism. Consequently, these theories also make it difficult to distinguish between populist and nationalist features of right-wing, populist parties. This article approached this challenge from a poststructuralist perspective which can add to the IR literature in general, and the literature on Indian foreign policy in particular:

First, poststructuralist IR renders problematic the dichotomy between 'domestic' and 'foreign' on which most IR studies on (Indian) foreign policy are based. Instead of taking, for example, India's identity for granted, as most realist and liberal studies, or studying how identity as an ideational framework impacts on Indian foreign policy, as most constructivist studies, a post-structuralist approach provides a reconceptualization of foreign policy as a discursive practice that constitutes and reproduces the state by demarcating the 'inside' from the 'outside' and the

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<sup>4</sup> I refer here primarily to Wendtian constructivism.

‘Self’ from the ‘Other’. Hence, foreign policy is the site where the state in whose name it operates is (re)produced and different political forces seek to assume the role of the representative of the people. This allows us, on the one hand, to understand the Hindu nationalist Right as a discursive project that seeks to hegemonize a particular representation of Indian identity and link the legitimacy of the Indian state to the representation of the Hindu people. On the other hand, it enables us to study the role of identity without essentializing India. Most constructivist analyses of Indian foreign policy, for example, conceptualize identity as a (typically internally generated) ‘property’ of the state that shapes its foreign policy (see Chacko 2012; Singh 2013; Ogden 2014). By endowing India with a particular attribute (such as ‘exceptional’ or ‘Hindu’) and tracing how this attribute influences its policies, constructivism can run the risk of essentializing the sociopolitical categories it seeks to explain. Poststructuralism’s relational concept of identity, by contrast, highlights that identities can only be constituted and practiced against the difference of an Other and therefore remain incomplete and contested.

Second, by drawing attention to the discursive construction of collective subjectivities such as ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ through different modes of antagonistic Othering, poststructuralism points to the important relationship between identity and security. This allows us, for instance, to understand why, contrary to the assumptions of realism’s objectivist and materialist understanding of security, the Hindu nationalist discourse is so fixated on Pakistan rather than the more powerful China. By constructing Pakistan as the threatening, aggressive, and barbaric Islamic Other, the Hindu nationalist discourse can represent India as Hindu nation and reproduce the notion of a peaceful and civilized, but also weak and forgiving Hindu Self that must develop martial strength and cohesion to confront the Other. Hence, the antagonistic Other is not merely a physical security threat, but makes possible the construction of a collective identity *and* blocks its full realization as its formation depends on this demarcation.

The identity/security nexus can also shed light on the puzzling but not explained “divergence” between the “more aggressive face of Hindu nationalism” in “domestic politics” and its alleged absence in foreign policy as well as the apparent convergence between the foreign policies of Congress and BJP governments (Basrur 2017, 8/25; cf. also Gupta et al. 2018). By showing how Modi’s BJP shapes a discourse that intertwines populist and nationalist logics and constructs ‘the people’ both as underdogs and nation, the poststructuralist analysis in this article can explain this divergence with the modes of Othering that underpin this discourse and its construction of meaning and identity. The discourse locates a powerful foreign Other *within* India in the form of a pseudo-secular, neo-colonial, and illegitimately powerful establishment that colludes with dangerous minorities who, in turn, have links to India’s external enemies. In short, the discourse suggests that it is the *lack* of a strong political boundary between Self and Other, inside and outside, that produces insecurities and dangers for the people.

The apparent convergences between BJP and Congress in matters of foreign affairs, in turn, result from the fact that the ‘secular-pluralist’ (post-)Nehruvian discourse of the Congress Party and the Hindu nationalist discourse of the BJP construct(ed) India’s identity in relation to similar external Others such as the British colonial rulers, Pakistan, and China, even though they represent these Others slightly differently. In the (post-)Nehruvian discourse, for example, Pakistan is represented as an ontological and physical security threat as it contests the secular-pluralist conception of India. Moreover, both discourses draw on a mythical narrative that traces the origins of India to an immemorial civilizational past and suggests that India existed, in the pre-Muslim and pre-British era, as a territorially bounded cultural/political community which extended over entire South Asia. This representation of India as a civilizational-state, coupled with the internalization of the imperialist thought of the British colonial rulers (Abraham 2014, 114), sheds light on the chauvinistic and hegemonistic tendencies in India’s South Asia policy.

## Conclusion

This article investigated the relationship between populist right-wing politics and foreign policy by analyzing how populist right-wing actors can use foreign policy to assert themselves as the ‘true’ representative of the people and sustain an electoral coalition once in power. In particular, it is the first attempt to integrate this phenomenon into IR theory and examine its international implications from the perspective of IR theory. Drawing on insights of poststructuralist theory, the article developed an analytical framework that enables us to theorize the relations between foreign policy, populism, and nationalism. While poststructuralist IR has shown how the discourse of foreign policy constitutes and reproduces the state by demarcating it from various international Others, I argued that the populist notion of the people can, like the state or the nation, be an ontological referent that is (re)constructed via the discourse of foreign policy. By focusing on the distinct modes of antagonistic Othering underpinning populism (up/down antagonism) and nationalism (inside/outside antagonism), the article identified different discursive strategies of constructing the people-as-underdog (populism) and the people as underdog *and* nation (populist nationalism) qua foreign policy.

Employing this analytical framework to the case of the Hindu nationalist BJP under Narendra Modi, the article demonstrated how Modi’s BJP shaped a populist-nationalist discourse that uses foreign policy as a site for asserting itself as the true representative of the people and reimagining India as a Hindu nation. The discourse represents Modi as political outsider who is placed alongside the people-as-underdog by juxtaposing them to a ‘corrupt’ elite that colludes with the foreign Other. The role of the foreign Other exposes the nationalist core of this discourse that seeks to politicize Hinduism and conflate the people and the Hindu majority community. The discourse thus constructs two overlapping subjectivities, the people as underdogs and nation, as potential sources of identification allowing it to appeal to a broader voter base and combine anti-establishment with Hindu nationalist sentiments.



Through the case study, I have tried to demonstrate the added value of adopting a poststructuralist conception of foreign policy that deconstructs the conventional, taken-for-granted separation between ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ and points to the boundary-drawing practices that inform foreign policy. While the current IR debate on Modi’s foreign policy focuses, in keeping with a conventional understanding of foreign policy, on the patterns of India’s external relations and draws a rigid line between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ (cf. Hall 2016; Basrur 2017; Ganguly 2017; Gupta et al. 2018), it fails to recognize the gist of foreign policy in the form of the relationships of Othering, modes of differentiation, and practices of exclusion through which particular objects are constituted as ‘foreign’ and it is (re)defined what the ‘domestic’ is made of, who is part of it, and, importantly, who has the political authority to represent it. As a result, we cannot understand “the determined application of Hindutva at home”, which is recognized in the literature (Basrur 2018, 10), in isolation from foreign policy and need to take into consideration the boundary-drawing practices that make possible the construction of India as a Hindu space and of Modi’s BJP as its legitimate representative.

As was shown, these discursive practices manifest, *inter alia*, in the representation of the political establishment as ‘foreign’, whereby Modi’s BJP effectively delegitimizes the Congress and other opposition parties and makes them enemies of the people<sup>5</sup>; the communalization of the India-Pakistan conflict, including the ‘surgical strikes’, and the projection of Modi as strongman who, unlike the allegedly ‘weak’ and ‘minority-appeasing’ Congress government, dealt with the Pakistani Other from a position of strength; and Modi’s Hindu Internationalism that seeks to project an image of India as a Hindu nation/civilization to the outside world and thereby redefines what Indian-ness means. This is no innocent “religious diplomacy” or Hindutva “soft power” (Gupta et al. 2018, 5) but has far-reaching political implications. Though Modi paid lip-service to India’s religious diversity and called it India’s “strength” (Modi

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<sup>5</sup> For the implications of Modi’s populism and authoritarianism for Indian democracy, see Jaffrelot 2017.

2017a), he has through his symbolic Hindu internationalism undertaken an effort to gain international recognition for a reimagining of India as a Hindu nation, thereby also empowering more militant Hindu nationalists in their attempt to assert India's Hindu identity against minorities and other 'dissenters' within India. The representation of Hindu India as tolerant and peaceful is fully in keeping with the Hindu nationalist discourse, as it reproduces the Hindu Self by differentiating it from international Others which allegedly lack these qualities and thereby allocates India a supreme position in the global order. Though there are elements in Modi's foreign policy that undermine principles of the liberal international order, the case of Modi and the BJP does not suggest that populism necessarily poses a direct threat to the liberal order or can be equated with anti-globalism.

As right-wing populists like Modi or Trump pit 'the people' against the elite and dangerous minorities and link them to external threats and Others, they partially override the established boundary between the secure and homogenous 'inside' and the anarchic and chaotic 'outside' that has traditionally underpinned the international relations discourse. Through their divisive identity politics, they promise that, through disciplining, disempowering, or potentially eliminating the 'enemy within', a clear boundary between Self and Other can be reinstated that offers full ontological and physical security.

Against this backdrop, this article's analytical framework adds to the IR literature by offering a theorization of the complex relationship between populism, nationalism, and foreign policy and showing how foreign policy is constitutive of the very sociopolitical categories that right-wing populists claim to represent: the people and the nation. By identifying different types of discursive strategies through which such collective identities can be constituted, the article's analytical framework can be applied to other cases and allows for the comparative study of the different ways in which the people/elite antagonism can be constructed and interacts with other

antagonisms such as the inside/outside divide of nationalism. Such study could not only compare different types of populist strategies both in and between countries, but also explore under what circumstances a particular strategy emerges or succeeds. In this context, a comparison of populists in opposition and populists in power could, for instance, identify potential variations in the use of these strategies. Though this article has deliberately chosen the more difficult case of right-wing populism, which closely intertwines nationalist and populist logics, the framework also allows for the study of left-wing populism and the comparison of left- and right-wing populism in foreign policy.

The poststructuralist framework developed here urges us to pay attention to the different discursive practices of relating Self and Other through which we can, for instance, distinguish between nationalist and populist logics and avoid that populism becomes a catch-all phrase for a range of distinct phenomena. Finally, by foregrounding a relational conception of identity, a poststructuralist approach can account for the role of identity in right-wing populist politics and its relationship to foreign policy, without essentializing the concept of identity and thereby reifying populist/nationalist claims. By highlighting the discursive constitution of collective identities such as the people, further studies could, for instance, examine how the affective or emotional power of populism plays out in the field of foreign policy and thus why individuals desire to identify with subjectivities such as the people and take them to be real.

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